

The detrimental effects of current counter-extremism measures on British Muslim families



Drawing on research conducted with British Muslim men and women living in Leeds or Bradford, [Madeline-Sophie Abbas](#) argues that government counter-terrorism measures have placed pressure on Muslim parents to counter extremism within their homes, something which can negatively impact relations within these families.

Marking the first anniversary of the Manchester Arena terror attack by 22 year-old Salman Abedi that claimed the lives of 22 people, the terror threat is high on both the policy agenda and public consciousness. Young Muslims have come under intense public scrutiny due to their perceived vulnerability to radicalisation. The [2011 Prevent strategy](#), the preventative strand of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy CONTEST, has placed [increased responsibility on parents](#) to police their children, including removing their passports if suspected of travelling to join the Islamic State or Daesh. The security agenda has crept into Muslim households through government-sponsored initiatives involving Muslim parents/families to counter extremism within their households such as Families Against Stress and Trauma (FAST), [Educate Against Hate](#) (Department for Education and Home Office 2018) and [#MakingAStand Campaign](#) (Home Office 2014) which works with Muslim women, particularly mothers, to counter terrorist recruitment.

Muslim parents are enlisted in countering terrorism, but are also deemed responsible for its allure. The [Radical Awareness Network](#) argues that families [may provide 'risk factors'](#) to reintegrating returned foreign fighters depending on their ideological influence or relationship to the returnee, citing the family as a potential 'breeding ground' for radicalisation. This situation has meant that [family law has become embroiled in counter-terrorism](#) to 'safeguard' children. An infamous case has been sisters Sugra, Zohra, and Khadija Dawood who took their nine children from Bradford to Syria to allegedly join the Islamic State.

Muslim families have witnessed increased scrutiny from social workers, community workers, nongovernmental and security and law enforcement agencies, leading to psychological repercussions on children and families. The role of Muslim families in countering radicalisation is thus a pressing policy concern, but currently there is a failure to address the detrimental effects that such measures may have on Muslim family relations as well as broader relations between Muslim families, the state, and the wider non-Muslim community in Britain.



Drawing on in-depth interviews with British Muslim men and women living in Leeds or Bradford, my findings show that co-option of Muslim parents to counter extremism within their households produces what I term 'internal suspect bodies' arising from intersecting fears of the Muslim groomer and Muslim youth 'at risk' of radicalisation. This category emerges where Muslim parents come to view Islamic markers such as the hijab, jilbab, and Islamic beard through the prism of extremism. Muslim parents may monitor young Muslims' religious identities and engagement in Islamic spaces and networks. Parents encourage young Muslims to adopt a 'moderate Muslim' identity in line with state prescriptions which in turn, restricts how young Muslims can perform their religious identities.

Parental responses are connected to two key fears: firstly, of their children becoming radicalised, or indeed radicalising others, and secondly, to protect them from being wrongfully targeted by state counter-terrorism officials. My study thus also contributes an important political argument of the need to move beyond state-centric accounts of the 'suspect community' to understand how counter-terrorism measures pervade Muslim families and communities, not just those under official suspicion.

Overall, my research shows that Muslim families are simultaneously securitised and insecured by counter-terrorism measures. State intervention is legitimised by a racialised account of Muslim families, particularly Pakistani Muslim families, as both a threat to national security and British values, transmitted through policy and media discourses and which burdens them with countering extremism within their households. This narrative is reflected in then Prime Minister, David Cameron's, infamous ['failure of state multiculturalism' speech](#) in which he argued that in the UK 'some young men find it hard to identify with the traditional Islam practiced at home by their parents,' which together with failure to identify with British values, makes them vulnerable to radicalisation. More recently, the controversial [Casey Review \(2016\)](#), commissioned by David Cameron to review integration, brandishes Muslim communities with a litany of problems including sectarian division, a lack of a formal hierarchy, and 'a need for clearer interpretation of Islam for life in the UK,' that collectively present Muslim populations as a threat to social cohesion in Britain.

A key shift in the narrative of counter-extremism policy is required to mitigate the negative effects of framing Muslim households as suspect sites. Pressures placed on Muslim parents to counter extremism within their homes places the 'problem' of performing Muslim identities as endogenous to Muslim populations and encourages internal divisions and tensions. This situation conceals the negative impact of state policies and further subjects Muslims to the restrictions of state governance.

Muslim parents fear talking to their children about terrorism in case they are referred under Prevent, particularly since the introduction of the [Prevent Duty](#) under the 2015 Counter-terrorism and Security Act which now places a statutory duty on a number of agencies, including schools, to report on individuals deemed 'at risk' of radicalisation. This has meant that the scope for young Muslims to discuss their beliefs has closed down which is counter-productive for combatting extremism. Importantly, external markers do not mean that Islamic principles are being followed or that Muslims adopting Islamic dress or the beard are extremist. Counter-extremism policy that is sensitive to a range of Islamic identities is required to mitigate not only fears of state intrusion, but intra-family tensions that are produced as a result, to enable young Muslims to perform their religious identities without fear of being suspect.

Note: the above draws on the author's [published work](#) in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.

About the Author



[Madeline-Sophie Abbas](#) is Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Manchester.

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